A Study of The Lexical and Morpho-Syntactic Errors of Fourah Bay College Students

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Abstract

This study investigates the lexical and grammatical errors in the English usage of some Fourah Bay College students at the University of Sierra Leone. Selinker's Inter-language Theory (1972) and Corder's Error Analysis Approach (1981) were used as a theoretical framework in examining the learners' errors. Data were collected by giving the learners a written composition to work on. From the subjects' essays, lexical and grammatical errors were extracted and categorized. The lexical errors were categorized into first language transfer and learning induced. The grammatical errors were divided into first language transfer, over-generalisation of target language rules, ignorance of target language rules, false concepts hypothesised and universal hierarchy of difficulty. Recommendations were also offered in order to minimize the learners' errors.

1.1 Introduction

This study involves the lexical and grammatical errors in the English usage of some Fourah Bay College students at the University of Sierra Leone who use English as a second language. The specific objectives include to recognize and describe the subjects' errors. The work was based on the Interlanguage Theory by Selinker (1972) and the Error Analysis by Corder (1981). According to Selinker, the learner's interlanguage comes about as a result of his intuitive creative potential. This means that there exists in the second language system an overt language structure which is stored in his brain. It is this internalised knowledge of language structure that is triggered when he processes the input data of the second language. Consequently, the leaner's interlanguage is hardly in conformity with what one expects native language speakers to produce nor is it an exact production of the learner's native language. This accounts for its special status. The Error Analysis Approach was important in the identification, description and explanation of the collected errors. These are the three main steps outlined by Corder as stages of error analysis.

Hundred and twenty (120) Fourah Bay College students were asked to write an essay of about four hundred and fifty (450) words that should end with the following statement: "That was how our relationship ended". The researcher identified the subjects' errors by reading through their scripts and ringing (the lexical error) or underlining (the grammatical error). In addition, he compared the deviant structure with its revised counterpart which is the second stage of error analysis. He finally used the third stage of error analysis by establishing a possible cause of the error.

1.2 Data Analysis

The errors that were identified in the collected data have been broadly categorized into two – lexical and grammatical. Each of their categories will be discussed in turn. The subjects' lexical errors can be broadly categorised as first language transfer and learning induced.

The first language related errors have two main sub-categories. These are the phonological system of the learners' first language and the transfer of the meanings of words in the learners' first language into the target language (translation).

As regards the phonologically induced errors, some English sounds are absent in the local languages of Sierra Leone. The subjects therefore seemed to substitute these sounds with the sounds they have in their first language. This accounts for the following peculiarities:

1. I decided to <u>live</u> (leave) him.

2. I <u>had</u> (heard) my mother weeping.

3. The first <u>taught</u> (thought) the devil placed in my mind was …

4. Martin made me to <u>loose</u> (lose) trust in men.

5. . . . without me <u>been</u> (being) sent to school.

The local languages of Sierra Leone do not make a distinction between the front close and the centralized front half-close vowels. The two vowels are merged as front close /i/ vowel and this is reflected in the subjects' writing system as is illustrated in 1 above. Similarly, the central half-close vowel /3:/ is absent in the local languages of Sierra Leone. Sierra Leoneans tend to replace it with the central unrounded open vowel /a/. This is what is indicated in the error in 2 above. In addition, the tendency among Sierra Leoneans to replace the voiceless dental fricative /Ө/ with the apico alveolar voiceless fortis plosive /t/, the velar nasal /ŋ/ with the alveolar nasal /n/ when it is in word final position and (for native Limba

speakers) the voiced apico-alveolar fricative /z/ with its voiceless counterpart /s/ is respectively shown in the third, fourth and fifth errors above.

Translation involves the transfer of the meanings of krio words or idioms into English words or idioms. Such krio words were viewed by the learners as the translation equivalents of their English counterparts. Therefore, the learners substituted the meanings of certain English words with those of krio words irrespective of the fact that the meanings of these words in both languages may be different. This is what is illustrated in the following sentences:

6. I hosted a stranger (guest).

7. They were looking at me as a guy with no better (good) education.

8. He sounded like a Fullah talking (speaking) krio.

9. When I heard the talk (news) I was devastated.

10. The apprentice (conductor) in the vehicle had to intervene.

11. When we came from the publicity, we met (found) our mother sitting in the parlor eating.

It can be observed from the above that the krio meaning which Sierra Leoneans sometimes give to English words often have either extended or restricted meaning. Hence it is that 'stranger' can be used to refer to someone whom you do not know very well; 'better' can imply both positive and comparative senses; "meet" can cover both an accidental and a deliberate encounter; an apprentice does not only learn a trade but also gets a reward. The significance of this source of errors should be emphasized because krio is an unofficial lingua franca which is "used for inter-ethnic communication by as much as 95 percent of the population" (Oyetadē and Fashole–Luke, 2007; 128). In fact, Jones (1967) seems to predict the likelihood for the krio learner of English to make such deviations when he states that certain lexical items once current in English found their way in the krio lexicon where they

still exist and enjoy usage while their originals have virtually disappeared from general use in English.

Furthermore, the influence of krio idioms can also be noticed as seen in.

12. He wanted to <u>know me as a woman</u> (have sex with me).

13. Whenever I visited her, she never <u>gave me a good face</u> (welcomed me).

The learning induced errors that fall in this category include the phonology of the English Language, its orthography and collocations.

The phonology of the English language shows that English has quite a few words that are homophonous or near − to homophonous. That is, the words sound the same or nearly sound the same but are different in meaning and spelling. The subjects often confuse such words as shown in:

14. We had two escape <u>roots</u> (routes).

15. It was an ugly <u>seen</u> (scene).

16. She looked at the area <u>were</u> (where) I was standing.

17. He was <u>quite</u> (quiet) and diligent.

18. Hence <u>their</u> (there) is life <u>their</u> (there) is hope.

A Possible cause for the above errors is that the subjects come across words more by listening than by reading. Therefore, when they come across a homophonous word in print, they may tend to use it to cover its homophonous partner.

Also, the orthographic pattern of English is such that a sound may be represented by different orthographic symbols. The subjects may therefore find themselves in situations where they do not know the correct symbols to use to represent a sound. This is what is illustrated in the following errors:

19. I regained <u>contiousness</u> (consciousness).

20. His statements were <u>essencial</u> (essential).

21. She was <u>truely</u> (truly) sorry.

22. He asked me to be <u>carefull (careful)</u>

The above errors can be traced to the application of analogy with other words in the target language. For example, 'contiousness' was likely formed in analogy with 'ambition' and 'relation'; 'essencial' (in analogy with 'provincial' and 'special') , 'truely' (in analogy with "kindly" "quietly" and "frankly").and "carefull" (in analogy with "full")

With regard to collocation, the subjects' knowledge of how some English words are paired up seems inadequate as shown in:

23. God gave me the <u>audacity</u> (revelation) to accept him as my husband.

24. I wonder how people could be so heartless to <u>levy</u> (inflict) such a deadly sickness upon my brother.

25. Whenever a duty is <u>levied</u> (assigned) to him, he would pretend not to know.

26. Jane was seriously <u>damaged</u> (injured).

It can be discerned from the above errors that the subjects seem to view synonyms as if they were absolute and could therefore be used interchangeably in all contexts. Hence it is that a "revelation" is equated to a command (see 23); "levy" can collocate with sickness (see 24) and duty (see 25), and "damage" can be applied to living things (see 26). In native English, these are words that are similar but they cannot be used in all contexts because they have different collocational range.

The subjects' grammatical peculiarities fall into six broad divisions: first language transfer, over-generalization of target language rules, ignorance of target language rule restrictions, incomplete application of target language rules, false concepts hypothesised and universal hierarchy of difficulty.

With regard to first language transfer, Krio contributes greatly to the emergence of some grammatical errors. This can for example be seen in the uninflected form of the subjects' verbs for the past tense:

27. I <u>find</u> (found) myself in hospital bed.

28 .I have never <u>spend</u> (spent) a night there.

In English, replacive allomorphs are often used in the formation of the past tense and past participle of irregular verbs. Since the local languages of Sierra Leone do not have irregular verbs, verbs are not inflected to show change in tense. The above errors are likely caused by this difference between the local languages of Sierra Leone and English.

The influence of the local languages can also be observed in pronoun usage. For example, in krio, the reflexive pronoun is used where English would prefer the reciprocal pronoun. This is observed in:

29 .They were throwing pestles at <u>themselves</u> (each other).

30 We started calling <u>ourselves</u> (one another) names of the past.

In addition, in krio and other local languages, pronouns are used where they are not desirable in English. This accounts for the following peculiarity:

31 I too <u>I</u> was very secured.

Finally, in the local languages, comparisons are sometimes made without the use of a comparative word. This has probably led to the following errors:

32 It is good to have faith in God . . . (rather) than to trust in men.

33 I then became . . . (more) frequent at her place than before.

Over-generalization of target language rules deals with the application of old strategies to new situations. That is, the subjects attempt to apply a rule that they have learnt to a new situation where that rule is not applicable. For example, the subjects may have possibly learnt the rule which states that adjectives that are disyllabic, trisyllabic and so on

are preceded by 'more' and 'most' when they respectively form their comparatives and superlatives.   This rule was generalized by the subjects to include adjectives that are monosyllabic.

34   My feeling became <u>more</u> <u>stronger. (stronger)</u>

35   That gave me a <u>more</u> <u>greater</u> (greater) shock.

In investigating the causes of second language errors, Richards (1974) comments on the relationship between overgeneralization and the misuse of prepositions. He contends that the learner who has identified a particular preposition collocating with a particular verb may be tempted to use, through analogy, the same preposition with a similar verb. Richards's observation can be related to some of the prepositional errors which are caused by faulty analogy. For example, owing to the collocation of the verb 'ask' and 'for', in 'ask for', 'talk' and 'about' in 'talk about', and 'surprise' and 'at' in 'surprise at', the subjects seem to follow this pattern when they use similar verbs in sentences:

36 She requested <u>for</u> it.

37   … to discuss <u>about</u> the matter.

38   She started to admire <u>at</u> those club girls on campus.

The errors that fall under ignorance of target language rule restrictions can be related to those caused by over-generalization in that they both deal with problems that emerge as a result of the rules which the learner has already learnt. What happens here is that the learner is unaware of the contexts in which his learnt rules cannot be applied. Hence it is that such rules are sometimes applied in wrong contexts as seen in:

39   … some of the <u>damages</u> (damage) caused to my village.

40   … using abusive <u>languages</u> (language) on her.

41 We saw a television, a video and other <u>equipments</u> (equipment).

It can be observed from the above that the rules governing the formation of plurals in relation to countable nouns have been extended to situations when they are used as uncountable nouns.

The following errors can also be discussed in the section:

42 I did not <u>allowed</u> (allow) him to …

43   All these facilities made him <u>to live</u> (live) a standard higher than me.

44   I saw a group of police <u>came</u> (come) into my house.

In 42 above, the subjects have possibly learnt that English verbs are often inflected to form the past tense. However, they seem not to know that once an auxiliary verb has been inflected for tense, the main verb remains in the infinitive. Furthermore, although they are familiar with the rule of inflecting the verb that follows the auxiliary 'make', yet they seem not to know that it is the bare infinitive that is required in this circumstance. This accounts for the error in 43 above. Finally, the subjects' knowledge of the rule that is concerned with verb inflection to denote past events has been applied to verbs that follow verbs of perception. This is shown in 44 above.

Incomplete application of target language rules deals with the learners' failure to learn the more complex English structure as they seem to assume that the relatively simple rules that they have learnt will help them communicate effectively. This attitude makes them get an inadequate knowledge of English rules. For example, while using determiners, the subjects appear to have a partial knowledge of which one to use in certain contexts:

45. It became <u>an</u> (a) habit.

46. I was here for almost <u>a (an)</u> hour

Furthermore, while discussing conjunction balance, Mesthrie and Bhatt (2008; 74) cite Williams (1987; 189) who notes that in relation to the rule of conjunctions, relations like "supposition" and "contrasts" are usually marked in each clause as shown in :

47. Although we were not in the same class, <u>but</u> (yet) the friendship lingered on.

False concepts hypothesized is concerned with errors that are caused by the subjects' wrong understanding of target language rules.   For example, the subjects sometimes use words to perform grammatical functions without paying attention to their grammatical forms:

48 He lived at his father's <u>resident</u> (residence).

49 I am still <u>marriage</u> (married) to Mr. Barrie.

50 He was given a <u>ten-years</u> (ten year) sentence.

As regards universal hierarchy of difficulty, researchers on second language learning like Richards (1974) and Ravem (1974) investigated the 'order of difficulty' which learners pass through in their attempt to communicate by using particular structures of the target language. The inter language of learners with different linguistic backgrounds revealed that they encountered similar difficulties in second language production. The difficulties that they faced are therefore universal.

Turay (2003 360) cites Pabai (1985), in her investigation of the English that is typical of educated Sierra Leoneans, discusses inter alia, the misuse of prepositions. She gives the following among her examples.

1. I am staying in the college campus. (instead of … on the college campus).

2. Milton Margai Teachers' College is playing volleyball with Fourah Bay College (instead of … against Fourah Bay College) (Pabai, 1985:15).

One can deduce from the above that the correct use of prepositions has often proved to be difficult for learners of English as a second language. One reason for this is that

the subjects do not know that prepositions can differ in significant ways. To them, the meanings of preposition may always overlap. This is evident in the following errors:

51 I requested for the document <u>in</u> (at) the airport.

52 I usually visited his house <u>during</u> (over) the weekend.

Similarly, in his investigation of Ghanaian English, Sey (1973) discusses the omission of function words such as the definite and indefinite articles. He discovers that this phenomenon is prevalent in all the academic levels in Ghana. One can use this as a basis to assert that the following errors of the subjects of this study are universal:

53 I picked … (up) the call.

54 I was surprised to hear such … (a) question from him.

55   He asked me … (a) series of questions.

56. Steve could not secure … (a) job for almost three years.

From the above, it can be deduced that the subjects' errors tend to have factors that account for their existence.

1.3 Recommendations

This section is concerned with the solutions that can be used to reduce the learners' lexical and grammatical errors. The following strategies may contribute to reducing the learners' lexical errors.

1. To enable the learners get the kind of exposure which they require in respect of the phonology of English, there should be language laboratories in all schools and colleges. The availability of these facilities will enable the teacher to teach the sound system of English   effectively. This instruction will capacitate the learners to "make new habits and overcome the difficulties resulting from the first language."(Gilakjani, 2016:2)

2. The learner should be encouraged to read works that are outside their prescribed texts. This means that they should not only be encouraged to join public libraries but they should also be provided with school and college libraries that are partly stocked with fictional and non-fictional books. If learners are engaged in intensive and extensive reading, their vocabulary will increase immensely. Donaghy (2016) emphasizes this point in the following statement:

> Experts in language and literacy development such as Harvard University Education Professor Catherine Snow believe that you   need to encounter a word or phrase in different contexts   between   15 and 20 times to have a high possibility of learning the word or phrase.

> Reading will enable learners to overcome lexical problems that are related to first language transfer, and the distortion of the meanings of English words. Furthermore, by reading widely, the learners will be conversant with written English. They can therefore become familiar with   the spellings of English words and are therefore likely to use them correctly when writing. In order to make the learners get the required exposure to the target language, each learner should be encouraged to read a fictional and a non- fictional work every month. The Sierra Leone writers' series which inter alia produces creative works of Sierra Leoneans is an opportunity that can be used in this regard.

3. The English teacher should regularly subject the learners to drills. In other words, when he recognizes a specific lexical fault and establishes why the learner commits it, he should find ways of helping the learner overcome that fault. The teacher can, for example, ask the learner to use sets of homophonous words in sentences to show their differences in meaning. Similarly, simple conversations which involve the use of the problem words can be devised. The importance of drilling can be seen in among

others Fransiska's study (2016) which seeks to investigate whether there is a
significant difference between the vocabulary mastery of seventh grade students who
were taught drilling and that of students who were not taught drilling. The findings
include there is a significant difference in vocabulary achievement between the two
groups of learners which shows that the drilling technique is more effective than
word listing with regard to the development of students' vocabulary.

The learners should also be encouraged to use English consistently in college and
where possible, in their homes. By constantly using a language, the learner will be
able to pin down lexical items that he is required to use in certain contexts. He will
therefore be induced to learn such words. This is what Allen means when he states
that: vocabulary is best learnt when someone feels that a certain word is needed,
(Allen, 1983: p.17). In this regard, it should be the teacher's responsibility to help the
learners whenever they run out of words in the process of constructing sentences.

4. To increase the learners' level of target language exposure, students should ensure
   that they listen to English radio programmes and watch English programmes on
   television. This is   significant because their knowledge of spoken English will likely
   affect their written English.

   The following suggestions, if adopted may help the learners reduce their
   morpho-syntactic errors.

   1. The learners should frequently be subjected to grammatical drills. The
      most effective way in which this can be done is by giving them written
      exercises that directly relate to their grammatical problems. The teacher
      can, for example, write on the blackboard a specific English pattern and
      ask the learner to follow that pattern by using a reasonable number of
      sentences .It can be realized that when the learners are exposed to

activities that are related to their grammatical problems, they will familiarize themselves with the correct English pattern. In this way, their errors will reduce. This is particularly true of errors that are related to incomplete application of target language rules, false concepts hypothesized and over-generalization.

2. If the teacher discovers specific grammatical errors in the learners' structures, he should promptly embark on remedial teaching. In order to make the teaching worthwhile, the teacher should adopt a different approach from the one used in the initial teaching activity. Remedial teaching is significant because it gives the teacher ample time to address the learner's errors.

3. The teaching of English grammar should be given a priority. This means that the learners should be exposed to the grammar of English right from the lower levels of primary school. Also, more time should be allocated to grammar teaching in timetables. If this is done, by the time the learners complete their first phase in secondary school, they may have acquired a solid foundation with regard to the grammatical rules of English "provided it is taught consistently as a means to improving mastery of the language, not as an end in itself." Ur P. 1991:77-78

1.4 Conclusion

It is hoped that the suggestions mentioned above can help to reduce the learners' errors. However, these errors can be 'fossilised' because of factors other than first language transfer. It may therefore be necessary to carry out a longitudinal study of the errors of Fourah Bay College Students with a view to establishing the case for the identification and

codification of the English spoken by these students and by extension educated Sierra Leoneans.

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